October 10, 1986

To the Editor:

I appreciate this opportunity to explain why the issue of topfree equality is important to me.

Prevalent attitudes toward women and women's bodies are unhealthy ones in our culture. That women's breasts may be seen for entertainment and profit-making in topless bars, and women can be arrested for getting comfortable in the sun at a beach or park reflects a hypocrisy and immaturity unknown in many other parts of the world, and in some parts of our own country. The view that women are not fit to follow a dress code suitable for men is part of the same view by which women are seen as unfit to have equal access to jobs, education, and a fair hearing in our political spheres.

That men may have such comfort and freedom and women are not offered this choice (to accept or reject, like any other option) is clearly discriminatory. We're not as backward as some countries, in which women are required to wear veils on their faces. But still, we've a long way to go. Throughout history, women have been required -- for "modesty's sake" or other dubious reasoning -- to wear more clothing. To abide by this means restriction of movement, comfort, and freedom of expression.

ANY INSTANCE OF DISCRIMINATION is important and is part of the larger composite of discriminations heaped upon people because of race, sex, age, etc. There may be issues that appear to be not PERSONALLY connected to me but that actually ARE connected to me because they involve equal rights and equal opportunities for EVERYONE. If an issue does not affect you imminently or directly, it doesn't mean that it bears no importance in the larger scheme of things.

A number of civil rights issues have been trivialized in the past not because they were insignificant but because those in opposition had difficulties dealing with the newness of the idea(s). Excuses have been offered often to keep injustices from being addressed. Women who fought so hard for abolishing slavery, for example, were chastised for pushing enfranchisement, lest the "larger cause" be neglected.

Some people were shocked at the idea of women voting. Some people were shocked when men removed their shirts in the 1930's.

Relativity does not cancel out the importance of an issue. Compared to the possibility of nuclear war, anything might be deemed trivial. I think, though, that other issues are NOT trivial, whether it's new sidewalks, support of the arts, the seat belt law, equal opportunity in education, world hunger, who's mayor of Rochester, topfree equality -- the list could go on ad infinitum. Our quality of life is important, whether it has to do with jobs, recreation, education, housing, peace, the treatment of women. . . ALL is important, or nothing is.

Issues outside of this one, by the way, HAVE been addressed and ARE being addressed by participants in and supporters of this particular protest. In my recent experience thus far, criticism of this action has been from persons uninvolved in other political and civil rights struggles, while the foremost spokespersons of our group of arrested seven have been instrumental in activities regarding peace, world hunger, and civil rights. One paradox here is that we feel it SHOULDN'T be a big

deal -- and it's unfortunate that it IS. We'd like to be catalysts in changing the present biased legislation.

I've found it curious to see that many who claim the issue trivial are making such efforts to explain why they feel it so: the D.A. goes to New York City on a work day to appear on the Phil Donahue Show; there are letters, editorials, etc. . .Interesting - to put so much time and effort into saying how unimportant something is to them!

I'd like to comment on the hypothesis of women appearing "too sexual" if shirts are removed. To deny persons equal rights on the alleged basis of "protecting" them is a specious, dangerous argument. To demand that some people follow a discriminatory dress code is like imposing a curfew on them so they'll be safe. Answers to the problems of crime do not lie in imposing restrictions on victims or in harassing people who are hurting no-one. Encouraging a more mature acceptance of women's bodies and debunking the "mystique" regarding breasts might be a step toward improving the problem of sex/violent crime. We spent four days in court sharing some of our views and perspectives and listening to the testimony of expert witnesses. Research points to this: that relaxed and optional clothing standards are healthy for children and adults; that men's breasts are as sexual as women's; that there is less sex-violent crime in areas where women go topfree.

Couldn't New York embrace a more civilized and mature attitude toward women, and reflect that in statutes that treat all persons equally?

It is questionable that the freedom for all to go shirtfree is not within an acceptable standard in a city as progressive as ours. Secondly, if prevailing community standards ARE biased and discriminatory, it is imperative to challenge the standards instead of adhering to them.

Feminist Margaret Fuller said over 100 years ago: "Inward and outward, freedom for woman as much as for man shall be acknowledged as a RIGHT, not yielded as a concession...Man cannot, by right, lay even well-meant restrictions on woman." Wherever injustice exists, voices of dissent must be heard. Whenever inequities under a law exist, laws must be challenged. Whenever certain rights and freedoms are enjoyed by only some segments of the population and denied to others, the discrimination must be challenged.

To all of you who have taken the trouble to listen with open minds and hearts to the possibility of change, I thank you. To all our brothers who are giving us support and encouragement, I thank you for the sensitivity to an issue that has not been experienced directly. I am grateful to those who have encouraged an open forum and opportunities to educate and be educated, to articulate perspectives and hear another's.

Sincerely,

Kathie Reilly